

**Red Wolf Recovery Program**  
**Field Notes and Observations**  
**Pup Season, 2007**



(Field notes are observations made by the red wolf wildlife biologists: Art, Michael, Chris, Ford and Ryan)

**May 2, 2007**

**Ford Mauney**

The den season started a little early this year. Our first litter came on April 10. Den season means we go and find the den of a breeding female wolf. It doesn't sound like much when you say it, but it is a double-edged sword so-to-speak. Finding a den often entails crawling, climbing, pushing, walking, clipping, and bleeding through miles of thick underbrush (tick paradise) of briars, wheat, and pushup piles (decomposing woody debris) searching for a hole in the ground, shallow bowl, or well camouflaged day bed with small brown puppies in it. In addition to the difficulty of finding the proverbial needle in a haystack, we are scratched, poked, stuck, and clawed by the thorns, leaves, and limbs and tick, chigger, mosquito, and fly bitten while sweating your tail off.

We do have the advantage of having a radio collar on mom, so we can at least get close to the right place to find her offspring. When we do find them, we record the sex of the litter, number of pups, check for parasites, take a small amount (two drops) of blood and implant a transponder chip.

The blood is used for our pedigree table. The pedigree table is the family tree of the wild wolf population traced back to the original wolf pair released at Alligator River. The transponder chip is the size of a large grain of rice and allows us to readily identify the animal as an adult. When we capture an adult wolf that is not wearing a radio collar, we simply scan it with a chip reader and identify it. We instantly know who it is, how old it is, and where it was born. This quick identification technique allows us to process the wolf and release it without holding it until the genetics work is done.

**May 3 rd 2007 04:01 am**

Gradually over sixty seconds I become conscious of NPR radio playing softly and realized that I was not dreaming. I reached over and shut off my alarm. Chris and I are going to find a den early this morning in hopes of catching a mother wolf feeding her pups. I get dressed quietly and ease out of my bedroom trying not to wake Debbie (my wife), so she can sleep another thirty minutes before she has to go do telemetry work on black bear. Daryl (our black pug) and I go outside in the cool night air for a short walk and to crank my truck and let it warm up. While Daryl is busy with his daily rounds, I get busy liberally applying my tick armor. It is nearly impossible to keep one's self free of ticks, especially in the thick vegetation where we spend a good share of our days. However, I make a strong attempt by spreading strong insect repellent directly to the skin and clothing. Daryl signals that he is ready to return to his dog bed and continue his appointed duty of sleeping.

I let him back in the house, lock the door and climb into my truck and pull onto the pavement heading east. It's 04:20 a.m. and I tune the radio to Coast to Coast AM. I call Chris in his truck to plan a meeting place. I arrive a little behind him and hurriedly gather my gear. We walk across a field to get to the area where we think she has denned, turn on our receiver and find that she is about a mile to the east. Her mate is about a half mile northwest of us. We decide to sit tight a while and see if she moves into the

area. After 30 minutes or so we figure out she is moving toward her mate. So we get back in our trucks and move to a better access point; a place where the wind won't tip them off to our presence.

### **May 3 rd 2007 07:15 am**

We begin tracking into their position. The habitat is a combination of cultivated land and rows of pushup piles. A pushup pile is a decomposing pile of dirt and wood usually 30-40 feet in width, 10-20 feet in height, and several hundred yards long. They are grown over with Rhododendron, Privet, Myrtle, various types of briar, and interdispersed large trees (deciduous and coniferous) along their length. They form long parallel ridges separated by about 100 yards. The foliage on either side of the actual pushup pile can extend another sixty feet off either side in places. The hedges and briars occur in patches like the black and white areas on a checker board. Hedges are usually six feet high or so, making it easier at times to crawl under rather than walk through. Open grass lanes weave their way in and around the areas between pushup piles, much like a maze.

We quickly determine that they are not together. She is on a pushup pile to the south of his location. They are about 200 yards apart. As we continue to track to her, we come to one of the ditches that drain water from the land. Her tracks are there and lead into the bushes ahead. She is close but the undergrowth is too dense to continue quietly, so we search for a more open route around her. It seems she is on the pushup pile ahead sixty or so yards ahead of us.

We work our way out to the edge of a canal where we can move quietly. The wind is coming head on so we track into the wind until she is directly to our left. I remove the antenna cable from the receiver and her signal is still audible, she can't be more than thirty feet away. We can't get closer going directly toward her and we can't see her. We see an opening ahead some twenty feet. As we move to it, she smells us and silently slips away. We go back downwind to confirm it and go around the other side; making note of the tall trees where we think she was.

### **May 3 rd 09:11 am**

We begin to search the underbrush making our way to the push pile and the area we thought she was at when she spooked. Chris takes one route and I another in order to cover as much ground as possible. As we converge on the pile of decaying cypress logs under the pine, we locate her at last. We notice belly fur shed just before whelping and a freshly excavated entrance under one of the logs. I get out the flashlight and hand it to Chris (the more slender of us). He crawls down into the entrance and then backs out. No pups!! It seems we have come a week early. She is getting things ready for her new pups. She will dig several dens prior to whelping so that she has several ready made residences available for the many times she will move the pups.

We gather up the gear and continue to search this pushup pile and also the one her mate was on before returning to our trucks to move on to the next potential wolf den. In our search we find several other fresh excavations seemingly abandoned because they were not suitable. Seven hours and no pups. When we get back to the trucks we decide to check on another pair that we think used last year's den again. The pups may be too young to implant transponders but we think it would be a good idea to check.

**May 3 rd 2007 12:20 pm**

Chris and I turn off the pavement onto the farm where the next wolf den is and then make a turn north up the main entrance. In the distance we notice a large track hoe excavator removing muck from the drainage canal. We draw closer, flushing a few Bobwhite Quail dustbathing in the road.

We soon realize that our choice to check on this den was the best thing that could have happened for the female wolf and her young. The excavator is just 60 yards from her den, scooping what would seem to be a pickup truck load of muck and dumping it into the road. As the bucket comes out of the canal it cuts the near canal bank clean, right up to the lip of the road. We turn down the road paralleling the canal, go around the excavator and stop at the old den. I quickly get out a flash light, jump down the bank and peer into the den entrance. Mother wolf looks up with a start just 3 feet in front of me. I back out of the den entrance and inform Chris that she is in the den. We walk back down the road to the excavator and get the operators attention as he sets down another truck load of muck. We ask the operator to stay clear of the den. He is more than willing to oblige and asks us to mark the area that he needs to avoid.

Chris and I are soon joined by Ryan. Together we use a thin rod to spook mom from the den and get the pups. Five males-this is good. Last year she had four females which we later caught and collared three. We quickly process the pups and get them back into the den. We talk a little more with the excavator operator and find out that he is pulling off this job for a couple of days. This is good news. It will give mother wolf a few days to move the pups. It appeared as if they were about the age that the adults move them, but for safety sake Chris will check on her tomorrow morning. The amount of disturbance could cause her to abandon the den and pups. If that happens we would have to take the pups and foster them in with another mother wolf.

Its now 3:00 pm, I still have an hour's drive ahead of me. Another long day. I am tired but again realize how much I enjoy the work. Daryl whines at the door while Jake, Elwood, and Lilly (our outside dogs) make their way to my truck to greet me. Debbie comes to the door and we head down to the barn to feed Sister (our pet pig) and the horses. It feels good to be home again.

**May 4 th 2007 08:23 am**

Chris called to let me know that the female and pups we processed yesterday are fine. She has moved her pups from the den near the excavator. Her radio collar signal indicates that she has moved to the block of timber that she has used as a nursery for the past six years. This is good news to me. She and the pups are out of reach of immediate danger from human disturbance. The wolves seem to be able to adapt to our presence, and if we adapt to theirs, it shows that humans and wolves can co-exist without conflict.